

A Candle in the Sunrise

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THE PUBLICATION OF Harold Stewart's *By the Old Walls of Kyoto* (Tokyo, New York: Weatherhill, 1981) is an event of great cultural importance for all interested in Buddhism. This book-length poem is the first sustained attempt by an Australian poet to present the main Japanese spiritual tradition and the culture it gave rise to in terms that can be grasped by an educated reader of normal intelligence and sensitivity.

Stewart's taste for personal obscurity before he left Australia found sanction in the Buddhist artistic tradition of China and Japan, in which it is the continuing life of art that matters, not the personality of the individual artist, so much emphasised in the West. His attention was first drawn to the Eastern tradition in 1939 when he read the works of C. G. Jung, whose influence was superseded in the late forties by a study of A. K. Coomaraswamy, René Guénon and Frithiof Schuon. Since 1961, the experience of Japan itself has replaced indirect influence. After settling in Kyoto, Stewart began to study under Bandō Shōjun, a Shin Buddhist priest and scholar, and Professor of Buddhism at Ōtani Daigaku, the Shin sect University in Kyoto.

With him, he has made a study of the many varieties of Buddhism, in particular of the branches of Pure Land Buddhism known as Jōdo and Shin. He has become a professed member of the latter sect, whose tenets are still widely embraced in Japan. Last year, the association of Stewart and Bandō Shōjun bore fruit in a fine new translation of the *Tannishō: Passages deploring deviations of Faith*, written in the thirteenth century by Yuien-bo, a disciple of the priest Shinran (*The Eastern Buddhist* Vol. XIII, No. 1 [Spring 1980]).

The principal result of Stewart's Kyoto experience, is this substantial narrative descriptive poem, *By the Old Walls of Kyoto*, finished in July 1974. Since then, Stewart has completed the scholarly commentaries which accompany the poem so that its esoteric significance can be communicated to Western readers, even though the surface pleasures of the poem are readily accessible and self-justifying.

The sub-title of the poem is "A Year's Cycle of Landscape Poems," and it consists of twelve parts, one of which is divided into two, so that we have thirteen long poems in all. They can, on a surface level, be enjoyed separately, just as visits to separate temples and gardens can be enjoyed for themselves, but they yield up their full meaning only when considered as parts of a whole.

The poem may be thought of as Stewart's testament to Japan, but it would be wrong to see it as having no relation at all to what he wrote in Australia. There is a clear line of thought and mood and aspiration from his exquisite early poem "Annunciation" written in 1940 to the poem that forms the penultimate section of *By the Old Walls*, the far more exquisite "Waiting for Sunrise at the Silver Pavilion under Snow." According to Stewart, his daimon knew all those years ago what business he should be about. But critics of a number of his early poems on Japanese, Chinese and Indian subjects found them baffling, largely because of what seemed to them to be an absence of "individual personal emotion"—the very thing that distinguished them from Western poetry.

Stewart's poem is an act of homage to the ancient capital and cultural centre of Japan, its temples, shrines, gardens, scenery, and art-treasures, a celebration in short of its incomparable artistic and spiritual heritage, which so narrowly escaped destruction by the atom-bomb, and which has been threatened since with slow obliteration by the obsession with "progress" Western style.

We are fortunate that Stewart in this poem has attempted to enshrine what he feels is most precious in Kyoto's heritage in "accessible" verse, before its richness is lost to consciousness in this age of "the Dharma in decay." But important as is this public level of the poem, it has profounder significance on other levels, first as an account of an inner, spiritual pilgrimage, personal but representative. Yet this personal quest, which provides narrative tension, is given only so much emphasis and only such kind of emphases as are in proportion to the other constituents of the poem. As in classical Chinese and Japanese painting, the human and the non-human elements in the poem are equally parts of the total design, and their relationship to the space around them is reciprocal and not competitive. Above these two levels (the literal and the psychological) are the moral and metaphysical, and the interplay from all four levels constitutes the poem's chief unifying force. The structural principle is symphonic; the outline is cyclic, the texture polyphonic, interweaving themes and counter-themes, while a complex system of *leit-motive* embodying the traditional language of Buddhist symbolism completes the work of coordination.

The twelve poems follow the course of the seasons, beginning in the late spring of one year and ending in the early spring of the following year. There is a climax at the summer solstice in Poem 3 and at the winter solstice in Poem 11; there are two points of equilibrium at the autumn equinox in Poem 7 and at the spring equinox in Poem 12. This annual cycle provides a firm time-framework for the whole.

Though the personal quest follows a linear development, it is embedded in a complex web of "themes" which emerge, submerge, re-emerge and develop at different stages, in various modes: lyrical, dramatic, elegaic, heroic and satirical. The two main "subjects" concern two apparently contending concepts

in Buddhist philosophy: the Shin theme and the Zen theme. The first represents the "Other Power" teaching of Pure Land Buddhism, particularly that of the Shin and Jōdo schools, which holds that man is unable to free himself from the human predicament by his own efforts, but must finally throw himself on the Divine Mercy, which is never refused. Zen, on the other hand, or rather a certain version of Zen, relies on "self-power," that is on the possibility of Enlightenment by strenuous effort and harsh ascetic discipline, both physical and intellectual, though much of this effort is designed to exhaust the ego and convince it of the futility of its struggle. The opposition between the two doctrines is in essence more apparent than real, though Shin and Jōdo have had an appeal to humble, suffering people which Zen appears to lack.

The Shin and Zen themes are stated and contrasted in Poem 1. They are then heard separately, the Zen theme in Poem 2, the Shin theme in Poem 3, then played off one against the other, with variations referring to related sects, until in Poem 11, they are juxtaposed once more. The subtle counter-pointing of these two themes unites the poem within the seasonal framework, and a further co-ordinating factor is the two poles between which the "guide-book" theme is balanced: Old Kyoto represents the Traditional values, as well as the Pure Land, the Heavenly City, while modern Kyoto is the Defiled Land, polluted by worldliness and greed.

The poem begins with "Climbing at Arashiyama in Late Spring." Arashiyama means "Stormy Hills" and is a famous beauty spot in the north-west corner of Kyoto "said to combine in one place all the beauties of Nature"—a fitting spot to begin such a work as this. The poet-as-narrator describes the setting, with its profusion of rich greens, against which moves a highly-coloured procession coming from a Shintō shrine, recreating the Three Boats Festival of the ancient Heian period.

The poets, tea-masters and musicians are in their separate boats, and the sounds of flutes and zithers fill the air. The poet-as-pilgrim then begins his walk, first strolling quietly past the country gardens, then mounting the rocky stairs which lead to Kameyama or "Tortoise Mountain" Park. The walk becomes an arduous climb in the mounting heat, naturalistically described with all the famous landmarks clearly delineated, as the relationship between Japanese painting and poetry requires. But even without the dozen or so lines which call attention to the fact, it is clear that the walk represents an effort to deal, through the will, with a crisis in the soul it is not equipped to handle; the contrast between the Easy Way of Faith (Jōdo-Shin) and the Hard Way of the Sages (Zen) is presented simply and directly—an admirable introduction to the more demanding poems which follow.

The second poem "Meditating on the Stone Garden of Ryōanji" has for its subject the most famous of the Zen gardens known in Japanese as "*karesansui*,"

or dry landscapes, in which trees, shrubs, flowers and water are replaced by raked gravel, rocks and stones, and sand. Like the great architect Walter Gropius and at much the same time, Stewart was overwhelmed by the beauty of the garden, and their response to the experience was strikingly similar. Gropius remarked that the scale of the garden was "monumental in spite of its insignificant size." It is this paradox of space that Stewart has managed to convey in verse, a paradox that stands for much else besides space. He has done this by relating the courtyard to what is beyond it in the landscape outside, and also by relating it to what is beyond it in other dimensions of being:

Nothing but mossy stillness grows inside
 These long low walls, which borrow from beyond
 Maples and pines, screening the lotus pond,
 For greener distance. In the level tide
 Of strictly furrowed gravel, coarse and white,
 Which motionlessly flows from left to right,
 The boulders, weatherworn and lichened, stand:
 Between them streams the corrugated sand
 Raked into long straight ripples, row on row;
 Except that round their rocky shores it flings
 Eddies of gravel in concentric rings:
 The steadfast Dharma is established so
 Amid Samsara's ever-circling flow.

The relationship between the first two poems may serve as an example of the careful articulation of the parts of the whole poem. They are related first by contrast in colour, tone and theme. The Arashiyama poem is full of lush, bright greens, of the sound of water and spring warmth, and it speaks of tension and effort. The second presents an opposing aridity; there is an almost total absence of vegetation in the physical scene, while the dry landscape at first suggests intellectual detachment, then a dryness of the heart, which would seem to be a consequence of the pilgrim's recognition of his total helplessness, acknowledged in the first poem. This contrast, however, though it is a component of the mental conflict, is not the primary one intended. More important is the contrast between agitation and stillness, feverish longings and intellectual contemplation; the movement is from spiritual pride and egoism, convinced of their ability to "earn" enlightenment, towards the point where the clatter of the ego will become hushed and the soul will stand still and listen.

The poem is designed to convey an effect of "deep tranquillity," of "mossy stillness," "acceptance," the pure detachment of stone as well as its utter simplicity. These qualities are emblematic of the Ultimate Suchness of which the epigraph to the book speaks. The final lines express the central Buddhist con-

cept of non-duality:

At once my self and garden disappear
 Into its boundless circle, centred here
 In evanescent beings, lightly buoyed
 Like summer clouds amid the formless Void,
 Beyond duality; both infinite Nought,
 And fifteen stones within a gravelled court.

The modulation from Poem 2 to Poem 3, "Feeding the Pigeons at Higashi Ōtani," is accomplished with equal ease. Just as the greenness of the first poem was retained faintly in the first few lines of the Ryōanji poem, in the reference to "wooded hills" and "mossy stillness," so the "stoniness" of the latter is carried over into the third poem, first in pure description, but later in opposition to its metaphorical usage in the second poem. The third begins:

Between the great stone lanterns, two by two,
 Standing as sentries up this avenue,
 I plod its broadly granite-paved approach
 That climbs the hill-side with a grandeur due
 Some mounted daimyo's gallant retinue. . . .

The "dryness" of the second poem also provides an atmospheric transition from the spring season of the first poem to the intolerable heat of midsummer noon, necessary to the symbolism of the third: The summer solstice parallels the high point of the Yang phase (positive, energetic) and therefore the beginning of the Yin phase (negative, receptive), as well as symbolising the gate of Hell. At the same time, from a mundane point of view, the poem is simply an account of an arduous climb on a very hot day to visit a Shin temple on Mount Higashi. Metaphorically, it is the pilgrim's ordeal by fire, to be balanced at the other end of the whole work by an ordeal by water.

Poem 3 is an act of self-criticism, a painful stage in self-insight, a shifting of the struggle in the soul from the plane of the intellect, in the first poem, to that of the heart, whose impulses are still frustrated by intellectual pride. The word "stone" occurs again and again in the poem in the sense of "blockage," a usage very different from that of the Ryōanji poem. The pilgrim gradually becomes aware that he stands in his own light, that men make their own hells and remain in them voluntarily. He sees clearly what he must do, without being able to bring himself to the point of doing it. The highest reach of the "Self-Power" way, symbolized by the Stone Garden of Ryōanji, has left the existential passions and conflicts unresolved, but at least the recognition of this fact is a sign that the Other Power is beginning to work.

The fourth poem, "Lingering at the Window of an Inn after Midnight,"

begins in a mood of lingering doubt, for which the night-sounds of a darkened landscape are an appropriate music. The poem is an exquisite nocturne, required not only by the personal theme, but also by the tonal design of the pictorial and symphonic structure. The pilgrim is awakened from sleep by the response of a tiny wind-bell under the eaves to the distant boom of the temple-bell—a lovely metaphor for the first call of the Name of Amida, the Buddha of Infinite Light and Compassion, and for the relationship between the divine and the human. The third section of the poem is a delicate colour-wash of earliest dawn, corresponding to the tremulous state of mind of the newly-awakened. This experience is reflected in the natural world by means of the vivid painting of the countryside scenes around Kyoto: the landscape itself seems made new.

The central poems—the two parts of number 5—curb any rash confidence the pilgrim may feel by showing the gulf that exists between divine and human compassion. They also provide momentary contact with the ordinary world of men and women as a relief from the individual's isolation.

In Poem 6, the Zen theme reappears. "Burning an Incense Stick at Mampukuji" has for its setting a temple that was once the headquarters of a Master whose teaching was a fusion of Zen and Jōdo Buddhism. The poem is wryly comic in tone, deflating, ridiculous—musically a *scherzo*. It satirises the effort to use religious rituals without true spontaneity, the attempt to debase the calling of the Name to a magic formula for instant salvation. When the pilgrim abandons his aping of disciplines foreign to him, his monkey-tricks, the Other Power arises unbidden and true tranquillity begins to take over, foreshadowed in a coming seasonal change:

A shadowy alteration that invades
And dims the hall whose sunlit *shōji* fades,
The first cool intimation that revives
Hope of relief at last?

A fitful gust
Over the footworn wooden door-sill drives
A leaf that summer seared, a drift of dust
To hint that autumn's regency arrives.

On every level, this poem and its sequel, Poem 7, form a fitting prelude to the three great autumn poems, 8, 9, and 10, the last of which is the climax of the whole. Poem 7 "Viewing the Autumn Moon from Daikakuji," is one of the most beautiful in the whole series; here the hostile sun of unsublimated passions gives place to contemplation of the Sphere of the Moon (Pure Consciousness of the Buddha-nature) and prepares the way for the sublimation in Poem 10 of the fiery intensities and desires of human nature into the "Sun" of the true Self.

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On a literal level the poem is a loving description of one of the most civilised of Japanese traditions: moon-viewing and poetic composition in beautiful surroundings. Metaphysically, the subject embodies that truth of permanence-in-transience, which is so hard for most Western minds to grasp. The poem engages all the senses; it is full of the haunting notes of the *koto* (zither):

A loneliness through all this music yearns.
Tuned to its overtones, my ear discerns
The sliding sigh, the plaintive slur of turns;
Ghostly arpeggios, whose whispers fail
As though a bird's wing flickered down the scale;
Or as the shallow streamlet round the walls
Trills in its pebbled channel, till it falls
Into a culvert, rushing underground.
Again, in single liquid notes is found
The quintessential eloquence of sound;
Melodic water-drops that, tone by tone
Distilled from silence, drip, discreet, alone,
Into a fern-secluded well of stone.

The visual imagery is equally arresting:

Look how those moonlight coruscations shake
A glittering swarm of fireflies in the lake!
Their dance, a constellated haze of light,
Hovers above the water, strangely bright;
But when the disturbing oars no more immerse,
Their sparks, sprinkled about the shore, disperse
Where intermittent glimmers wink and pass:
Poets composing *haiku* in the grass.

The evanescence of this "perfect night of Buddhist peace and beauty" is crystallised in the final image of non-attachment:

The hour grows late. The mood and music fade.
So we return, and while the pole is plied,
Leaning upon the low wood balustrade,
I dip and trail my hand over the side,
The warm black water slipping through my fingers:
The more they clasp its flow, the less it lingers. . . .

This calm resting-place, or at least *adagio*, in the music heralds a mood of despondency, induced by the emergence of new existential conflicts, of which the narrative equivalent is the tragic story of the ex-Empress Kenreimonin, who

became the Abbess of the Jakkō-in, the setting of poem 8. This poem forms the first part of the autumn trilogy, which is perhaps the finest part of the work, and by far the strongest. "Sheltering at the Jakkō-in from Morning Rain in Early Autumn" uses the story of Kenreimonin, who was rescued from death against her will, as a parallel to the pilgrim's own disgust with life. Like the Empress, he is faced with having been dragged back from release to live out a grey existence, perhaps for years, with all its risks of doubt and back-sliding, of losing the brief vision of hope which he has been granted. The mood is one of despair and self-judgement, of terror of death and of the more fearful judgement of Enma-Ten, the Lord of Death. Such a mood of doubt and cynicism is a commonplace of religious struggle; here it is dispelled by an appeal to Jizō Bosatsu, whose wooden statue stands in the main hall of the temple. Jizō is one of the Bodhisattva forms of Amida, and as the gentle counterpart of the stern Lord of Death, can descend into Hell and intercede for the damned. The historical narrative of the poem is taken from the *Heike Monogatari*, or *Tales of the Heike*, an anonymous collection of stories about the struggle for power between the Taira, or Heike clan, and their great rivals, the Genji, or Minamoto clan in the 12th and 13th centuries. The ex-Empress, who was rescued from the sea after the great naval battle of Dan-no-ura in 1185, captured and then banished from the court, is said to have traversed all the six states of existence in her lifetime; hence in the poem, her history becomes an image of the extreme vicissitudes through which the soul must pass while it is bound to the wheel of re-birth. As Stewart tells the tale in verse, it takes on something of the eerie nobility of a Noh play, combining *yūgen*, or the mysterious profundity of Noh, with the heroic tones of the saga. It is the season of autumn rains and the temple is permeated with the memory of the unhappy Empress, so that all nature seems to weep at it:

One bead of rain is threaded on the tip
 Of every needle, so that moisture blurs
 And softens with its drops the conifers,
 Until the emerald bristles let them slip.
 That sparse ancestral pine whose branches lean
 Over the pool, has stood a thousand years;
 But does it shed from tufts of rusty green
 The recent shower, or are these ancient tears
 That tremble, over-heavy, till they drip
 Into the tranquil shallows? . . .

The poem is intensely moving, dramatic and poignant. It conveys the grief of the realisation, that though the way of faith seems easy, the truth of Karma, the effects of one's past deeds, cannot be avoided, but must be lived out in this world.

The ninth poem "Rambling in Midautumn Afternoon through Ōhara's Fields" opens in a subdued mood, fitting enough after the descent into despair overcome with such difficulty. But now the mood changes and there is an access of strength:

The road ahead is flickeringly strewn
With imminent brightness. Now before my gaze
It opens out upon a sunlit mood:
The broad maturity of afternoon
When youth, in my midautumn, seems renewed. . .

The poem that follows is a lovely pastoral bathed in mellow afternoon light, full of the vitality of country people and their occupations. As it progresses, there is a heightened feeling of expectation and longing, accompanied by a sharpening of the senses, so that:

The landscape seems transfigured, born anew:
Persimmon branches that have all but shed
Their autumn leaves are hanging overhead
Clusters of fruit, with sunlight slanting through
Their orange globes of sweetness, almost ripe,
As though the richly-laden trees were burning
With lampions of gold against the blue.

There is a sensuous Keatsian richness about the descriptions to which isolated quotations, chosen to illustrate a particular point, cannot do justice. Much of the texture of the trilogy seems to glimmer with the opulence of an ancient brocade, a ceremonious vestment, but the richness is sacramental: the outward and visible sign of a quiet increase of confident joy that communicates itself to the reader with uncanny immediacy, and which prepares him for the triumphant affirmation of the final poem of the trilogy. These three together form a kind of miniscule Divine Comedy; the first, the Buddhist Purgatory; the second, the Buddhist Earthly Paradise; the third, the Buddhist Pure Land. It is important to remember however that for the Buddhist, the attainment of Heaven is not, as for the Christian, a final state. In Mahayana Buddhism, the Western Paradise, or Pure Land, is the upper limit of the Worlds of Desire, or virtual Nirvana. From here the aspirant must still ascend through the Worlds of Form and the World of Formlessness before attaining to actual Nirvana. Stewart, in his commentary, points out that the Sanzen-in poem only takes the pilgrim from the Samsaric (fleshly) circumference to the "Edenic" or Central State (equivalent to the Earthly Paradise at the top of Mount Purgatory in Dante), from which he can gain his first glimpse of the higher states of being: that is, he has now completed the Lesser Mysteries. But he still needs to ascend

the vertical Axis Mundi to possess effective knowledge of those states, that is, to complete the Greater Mysteries.

Technically, the trilogy is an experiment in "literary time"; the whole of autumn is compressed into one day, and the third poem takes the same time to read as it would to make a leisurely inspection of the temple (like the Jakkō-in, a Tendai temple) and its treasures. This last poem of the trilogy, Number 10, "Arriving toward Sunset at the Sanzen-in in Late Autumn," in a religious sense completes the transition from the Zen theme to the Shin theme. It is the high point of the book as a whole, representing the true awakening of the Buddha-nature in the pilgrim, an awakening which Shinran, the disciple of Hōnen, equated with the Mind of Faith. Through stages of natural description, through allegory and iconographic symbols to the direct Vision of the Amida Triad and the Pure Land, the poem traces the progress to attainment of the eternal Here and Now, rising at times to a rare eloquence. Quotations can give only a rough idea of this progression, from its representational opening:

Grey ramparts rising in a battered slope
 Of boulders, lichen-blotched, seclude from sight
 The Sanzen-in above their massive height;
 For maple-branches leaning from the cope
 Or bordering the path, have overlaid
 A fretwork roofing on the long arcade
 That lets the westering sunlight flicker through
 Its gold and crimson stars. When I have strayed,
 Viewing this richly glowing avenue
 Where haze, diffusing faintly, interweaves
 With bluish drifts of smoke from burning leaves,
 I mount the granite steps that interrupt
 The castle ramparts, broad and yet abrupt,
 And pass beneath the tiled and timbered gate
 Of Genshin's temple.

to the point where the paintings in the temple suggest to the pilgrim allegories of his state of mind and begin to shift the verse to another level:

Although its mural-scene is autumn-hued,
 These wind-blown trees arouse a wilder mood.
 Why does a golden incense-burner smoke
 Upon this mountain-top and cloud the air?
 Whom does this monk with aureole invoke,
 Waving his ritual thunderbolt and bell,
 While a disciple kneels nearby, his hair

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Swept aside in the gale, his hands in prayer?
As white tumultuous billows rise and swell,
His mantric incantation starts a strange
Aspiring liberation from that pine's
Outleaping trunk and limbs, enchained with vines.
It claws the ground with crooked roots. It flails
A lightning-splintered branch as tail. The change
Writhes up its dorsal bark, which cracks in scales,
Until it rears a dragon's head with weird
Twig antlers, knots for eyes, and lichen beard.
So when the Buddha calls his Name through me,
Though still imprisoned in this human tree,
My soaring spirit, too, would struggle free.

In the second section of the poem allegory gives place to iconographic symbols, as the poet ascends to the main hall where the statues of Fudō Myōō and the Guze Kannon stand side by side. The first represents the Immovable Will, and is the wrathful form of Dainichi, the Great Illuminator; the second is Boundless Compassion. Fudō, fierce of visage, has vowed to save those who will only yield to force, not persuasion; the other succours the fearful. They are placed side by side because their virtues and functions are complementary. Contemplation of the statues and their meanings, and the inspection of the ritual objects of Tendai worship, meticulously described, lift the pilgrim's mood to a stage of receptiveness fully expanded in the third section. In this the poem begins to move towards its visionary climax.

As the pilgrim sits lost in contemplation, looking out over the garden, the descriptions of the temple and its grounds become, stanza by stanza, parallels of the Thirteen Meditations offered by the Buddha to Queen Vaidehī as a means of achieving a vision of the Pure Land. The maple trees of the garden suggest the Meditation on the Trees of the Seven Jewels, which grow in the Pure Land; but at the same time they remain enormously evocative of "real" maple-trees in the afternoon sun—the very page seems bathed in light:

Infiltrating the branches, vivid rays
Have set the scarlet maple-leaves ablaze,
Matured by months of frost and sun, as though
With bright intrinsic fire they were aglow,
As red as garnets or vermilion sard. . .

Slanting across the tranquil lawn there lies
A timeless golden light that glorifies
All that it falls on. In those numinous rays

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During this one immortal moment floats
A minute universe of sunlit motes,
The thousand million cosmic sparks that daze
The air but halo it with amber haze,
And every speck is precious: I behold
Those worlds of dust transmuted into gold.
The garden is enmeshed within a maze
Of radiance, for the sun still interlaces
Its bright reticulations through the frets
Of twig and leaf, and catching in its traces
The seven-jewelled trees before it sets,
Covers them with luminous golden nets.

This warm light suffuses the last part of section 3, while the pilgrim walks through the garden to the Hondō and leaves the sunshine for the sudden darkness of the entrance to the Hall. This unexpected though natural plunge into gloom, as he gropes his way to the sanctum, symbolises the final extinction of the ego before he is vouchsafed his brief glimpse of the Boundless Light of Amida. The autumn sunlight streams into the Hall over the images of the Amida Triad and the faded representations of innumerable Bodhisattvas, transmuting them not only to their former artistic glory, but into a spiritual vision of their eternal reality.

As the description of the Amida Triad proceeds, and the pilgrim is impelled to worship, the poetry rises to a solemn incantatory splendour, seldom heard in Australian verse. Embedded in the verse is the cry which is the central and sole requisite for salvation in Shin: the calling of the Name takes the form of an acrostic made by the first letters of the lines from 724 to 737—*Namu Amida Butsu* (I invoke, or take refuge in, Amida Buddha).

The fifth section of this poem returns us to the world of time, to the cool evening and the homely duties of harvester and winnower. The natural description is more exquisite, as though the vision of the noumenal world had transfigured the phenomenal world which is its manifestation. The final haunting stanzas prepare us for the winter poem which follows:

These last warm days of autumn in decline
Draw in the wintry dusk, and so do mine.
If soon the earth and I must undergo
The hushed, the purifying death of snow,
Let the wind strip the ragged leaves that cling:
They go without regret. Though overnight
Our naked branches are attired in white,
Do we complain against the cold who know

That patient buds already wait to bring
The ever-faithful poignancy of spring?

In its own way, the poem that follows is as powerful as the tenth. The brilliance of "Waiting for the Sunrise at the Silver Pavilion under Snow" is internalized, more restrained, yet it is, perhaps, as sheer word-painting, the most vivid of all. On a literal level it depicts the Ginkakuji pavilion, built in the 15th century by the Shōgun Ashikaga Yoshimasa. When covered with snow, it is said by those who have seen it to be an awe-inspiring sight. Those who have not seen it can almost believe they have by reading the poem. The setting is a Zen temple and, metaphorically, represents the stage of *ōsō-ekō* or Going to the Pure Land, which is seen in a vision, through this world, emphasising the non-duality of the two.

The most dramatic part of the poem is the description of the pilgrim's confrontation with death, the ultimate test of his new-found faith. In mundane terms we have an account of a severe attack of *angina pectoris*, brought on by climbing in the cold; its pains are said to match the pains of hell. The agony and the terror of annihilation are conveyed by the transformation of the dazzling landscape into images of horror, analogous to the doubts in the pilgrim's mind:

The stones on which the snow lies smoothly rounded
Turn into white decapitated skulls.
The maples, bleached as stark and bare as bone,
Conjure up skeletons from withered sticks,
And stiffly crooking twigs as fingers, fix
Gestures of terror which I face alone.

The terror is dissipated only by the Name and by the acceptance of the inevitable:

At last my calm acceptance looks to where
A dove, its head and shoulders heaped with white,
Froze in its sleep upon the bough last night.

The poem ends with an ecstatic description of the sunrise behind Mount Daimonji, filling the landscape with glory—a natural image of Amida's halo releasing the spirit on its journey to the Western Paradise. The triumphant conclusion to the poem, affirming that death, like the snow, is transfiguration, not obliteration, modulates to the elegaic music of the final poem. Here the pilgrim returns, with mournful reluctance, to the familiar world of everyday life. The poem is entitled ironically "Returning through the Old Graveyards of Shinnyodō and Kurodani" and is concerned with the stage of *gensō-ekō*, the Bodhisattva's willing sacrifice of his liberation to return to aid the suffering beings still bound to the wheel of this world. But the pilgrim is no Bodhisattva, and his unwillingness to return is contrasted with the divine compassion. Nor has he any confidence that his own

experience will be heeded: he is far advanced in life, and like his contemporaries, belongs to the Final Age of a cycle, or *mappōji*, in which, Buddhists believe, the truth of the Dharma will be obscured, and the re-birth of spring will take place only in the sunset of an era, from its ruins. It is fitting perhaps that the Shin theme, stressing utter reliance on the Other Power, should sound again in a poem which sees little hope of human regeneration. As the pilgrim gazes with a sinking heart on the polluted city, the final image nevertheless fuses disgust and foreboding with faith:

I reach the foot of Kurodani's stair,
 But when I cross the Chinese bridge below,
 Whose stone back curves as steeply as a drum,
 To span the temple pond, stagnant, forsaken,
 Littered with refuse, I am overtaken
 By cherry petals that already blow
 To waste, and stray upon the evening air
 Until their shower of faintly blushing snow
 Scatters the mantled water's jade-green scum.

By the Old Walls of Kyoto makes its chief impact, no doubt, as a narrative of a spiritual quest, yet it is important not to dismiss the intention as well as the pleasures of the surface. As Eastern cultures know better than our own, poems in measures easily committed to memory and pictorially vivid, are important historical records. If the Old Kyoto should disappear, much of it will survive spiritually in this poem in a Western language, and that is no mean achievement. Stewart has described his own aims with becoming modesty:

They are longish, rambling, descriptive poems, little plots to wander in, a sort of poetic guide-book to Kyoto, but with philosophic and religious discursions. . .

The summary is over-modest—a more tightly constructed epyllion it would be hard to find. But Stewart's respect for his literal intention has caused him to search for an ever-simpler, clearer style "as easy to read as prose, but with a traditional verse-form and without loss of poetic richness." The flexibility of the English pentameter enables him to move at will, from ceremoniousness to satire, and also to achieve the formality-with-ease characteristic of so much Japanese and Chinese art. The diction is intended to reveal, not to astonish; the aim is clarity of communication, not self-expression. So transparent is the style that the notion of style is almost absent and so forms no barrier between the reader and the world the poem creates.

The Eastern virtue of humility before the object, not the wish to dominate, analyse or possess it, is paramount. This effect of transparency is due, not merely

to the demands of the poem's literal intention, but also to Stewart's poetic theory. He has described himself as "that wicked old reactionary, dedicated to abominations like rime and metre and direct statement as against obscurantist pseudo-symbolism." His defence of the "metres" was formidable enough in the 1940's when he wrote a paper on the subject for *Meanjin Quarterly's Workshop* series; since then he has accumulated metaphysical arguments to support him, from Vedic sources, which provide a formidable challenge to the dismembered verse fashionable at the moment.

The simplicity and ease of Stewart's writing have their counterpart in the reserve with which he handles the central *persona*, or rather two *personae*, of the poet-as-narrator and the poet-as-pilgrim. The absence of egoism, of a self-conscious wrestling with the language to "make it new" (as though dinners could be made of something else besides food) leave the reader free to attend to what the poem is saying. It is true that we pay attention to the "I" in the poem who is the pilgrim, but he is a character in the poem. We are not beset with claims for the *poet's* supposedly precious identity, that fetish of Western romanticism. A consequence of the detachment with which the poet surveys the "person in the poem," so that he becomes a vehicle for something greater than himself, is the sense of liberation felt by the reader as he becomes gradually more absorbed in the work. Something of the harmony and equilibrium acquired, or vouchsafed, to the poet during the long dedication to his subject are in fact communicated to a receptive reader prepared to walk at the poem's pace. Another bonus for those who care for poetry rather than poets is that Stewart has pre-empted the rise of an interpretative industry. In Buddhist practice, prose commentaries on the sutras were often followed by concise poetic summaries. Here the process is reversed. The poems are followed by readable commentaries which give the necessary background for understanding without depriving the reader of the pleasure of forming his own aesthetic judgements.

But the scholarship and the firm poetic principles which underpin this poem are not enough in themselves to account for the assurance of the writing. Beneath the smooth surface of the poem one senses an unassailable conviction, a steady, secret radiance of faith.

Indeed, in Australian literature Stewart's poem is *sui generis*. It is not a conventional narrative poem, and though it is long by modern standards—4350 lines—it is too short for an epic, though it has certain epic characteristics, e.g. it is divided into twelve books; it deals with a heroic past (of a city), and, by implication, with the art that created that past; it singles out for special treatment some of that city's saints, and deals with one famous and one obscure heroine; it has a protagonist, the Old City, and an Antagonist, the New City. Its theme can be said to be sublime, in so far as it is the exposition in narrative-dramatic form of a metaphysic which has claimed the allegiance of millions of people for more

than 2000 years; and this exposition, by means of a human "action," interweaves with great precision the two main "contending" branches of that metaphysic. There is conflict, as epic requires, at various levels. Arguments about definitions, however, have little point. What really matters is the appearance of a poem on a serious subject, which can be called "public," a poem in which the poet is once more a man speaking to men, using a mode which, like that of the parable of the Good Samaritan, can be called realist, or even naturalistic, but which conveys fundamental truths.

My business has been with the poem as a poem in the English language. It would be impertinent for one who is not a professional Orientalist, to express an opinion about the content of the prose commentaries. All I am able to say is, *not* that they throw light on the poem, because that is clarity itself, but that they throw light on the immense effort of scholarship and meditation that contributed to making the poem; that they are immensely informative, as well as enriching to mind and spirit, and that they are, as one might expect from the prose commentaries in the two volumes of *haiku* translations, *A Net of Fireflies* (Tuttle, 1960) and *A Chime of Windbells* (Tuttle, 1969), stylishly written, and lightened, where it is appropriate, with a dry wit. The commentaries occupy three-quarters of the book, and for those who prefer prose to poetry, they will provide the *raison d'être* of the book equally well.